

Traffic stymies suburbia

By Elaine Iandoli
Staff Writer

If someone made a movie about transportation management, people like Carlo Garabedian and Jeremiah Marron might be cast wearing white T-shirts depicting a traffic jam entangled in red with a slash through it.

Traffic busters. The jobs of Garabedian, who is Greenwich's traffic engineer, and Marron, supervisor of the traffic division of Darien's police department, require more than attention to the signs and street lines of their municipality. Like their counterparts in other Fairfield County towns, they find traffic management is often a big, busy and frustrating business, complicated by intense development pressures and an increase in commuters.

In some municipalities, such as Darien, traffic is mainly handled by the police department. In others, such as Stamford and Norwalk, entire departments devoted only to traffic take on most of the task. Still others, including Greenwich, use a traffic engineer or small division of a larger department, such as public works. In most of the municipalities, the officials say more manpower is needed to help cope with the increasing demands of the job.

Coordinating traffic means making sure that traffic signals in huge office parks are synchronized, that center lines and crosswalks are painted clearly on the roads, that parking garages are maintained and scooters pay up and that troubled intersections get regular attention to help keep things moving.

It means working with police, public works, parks and recreation and planning and zoning departments. It means responding to residents' complaints and meeting with local traffic authorities, which can be politicians or police commissions. Above all, it means performing a delicate balancing act with safety as the priority, in trying to make sure that

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residents feel secure while driving or walking on their streets.

"You're constantly trying to hit problem areas," says Inspector William Chiarenzelli, who heads the traffic division of the Westport Police Department.

Chiarenzelli says he is encouraged about a regional approach to traffic management where traffic officials realize transportation problems are not unique to their own towns.

"The same car that's on our roads, five minutes from now will be on a Norwalk road," he says.

"We're trying to create the kind of balanced traffic situation that responds to the needs of the community," says Clarence Nelson, director of the Norwalk Department of Traffic and Parking. "We want to create a traffic system that gives efficient movement to citizens."

In Stamford, the implementation of a \$2.4 million signal optimization control system later this year may foster such movement.

Vincent Akhmerie, the city's recently hired director of the parking and traffic department, said the system, which he calls state-of-the-art, will control more than 50 intersections from a central office.

With the receipt of data from certain "control" intersections, optimum traffic flow can be maintained and monitored from an office.

The officials in charge of traffic coordination in lower Fairfield County have different problems to grapple with and different parameters under which they must work.

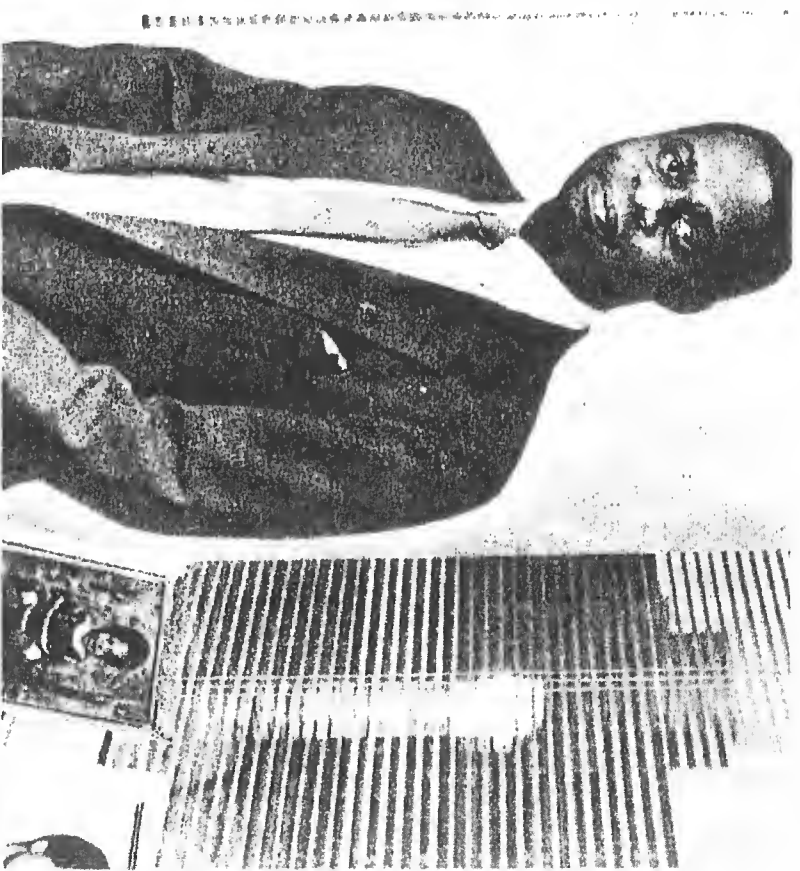


PHOTO BY LUCY PEMONI

Vincent Akhmerie, Stamford traffic and parking director, in his office.

Preserving the small town character is a primary goal in some towns while cities have already moved past that point. But their common goal which overshadows any differences between the towns, the officials agree, is to ensure efficiency in the traffic world, be it on major roads or smaller streets.

"A problem in a residential community is just as critical as one on a state highway," Nelson says. "We have concern for the traffic welfare of the entire community."

"It's a big issue," Marron, of

Darien, says. "When we talk about rush-hour traffic, sometimes it causes many complaints."

For Marron, the goal of traffic management can be summed up in five words: "safe flow and sufficient warning."

Marron, along with others in charge of traffic coordination, have noticed that traffic problems have grown, like the municipalities, in the past few years.

"I think it's just an influx of people," said Capt. Michael Angelastro, commander of the New

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Canaan Police Department's uniformed division. "We have a great deal of commuter traffic, more so than I've ever seen."

"People have found their way through the back roads of Darien," Marron said. "I've noticed in the last three years a tremendous increase in traffic on the back roads. We have speeding motorists on streets where we never had complaints before."

Complaints are a large part of the business of the traffic busters.

In Greenwich's Town Hall, Garabedian sits in a small office, parking signs in the corner of the room, his desk and part of the floor covered with correspondence from the state, his superiors and residents.

In another adjacent office, the day's mail waits, unopened.

"I'm afraid to bring it in," he says with a grim smile. "We get hundreds of requests each month for improvements — some of them are handled faster than others. People are very concerned and cognizant of traffic problems in this town. They're concerned about safety."

Garabedian appears at nearly every weekly Board of Selectmen meeting, briefing the selectmen on problem areas in town that have been brought to his attention.

His presentations are often the ones that attract the most attention at the meetings. Residents, many of them women with young children in tow, listen carefully to Garabedian's presentations, sometimes disputing his remarks or suggestions, other times agreeing with him. They rise to recount their own

horror stories of speeding motorists, ignored stop signs and perilous traffic conditions. Often, they have signed their names to petitions calling for changes, and they expect the town, through Garabedian, to respond.

"That is the major source of concern and activity of this office," Garabedian says, adding that the selectmen will also refer upset residents to him who have complained about traffic problems. "From those meetings, I receive more work to do. By and large, their requests are valid."

Some, however, cannot be accommodated because they would interrupt a smooth traffic flow or, upon investigations, are found to be unwarranted.

The investigations make up a major part of traffic management in lower Fairfield County municipalities. Each petition calling for a stop sign or or speed limit sign, as well as phone calls, are researched by police or engineers. There are site distance measurements to be made, traffic counts to be conducted and interviews with local residents.

"Whatever request we get requires us to give it attention," Nelson, of Norwalk, says.

The officials in charge of traffic often cannot make their decisions without input from other departments or town officials.

A proposal for a fire lane, for example, would require discussions with the fire department, while developers' plans for new office buildings, carefully scrutinized by local planning and zoning boards, also require input from the

traffic division. Local construction work might also be closely watched by traffic officials who may impose conditions for the work site, such as the number of flagmen or signs required for safety reasons.

"We don't want to end up hurting one agency and helping another," Chiarenzelli, of Westport, says. "It's a sharing of thoughts, responsibilities."

In towns where development and change are often viewed as threats, proposals for stop signs, road widenings or traffic signals must be considered with caution.

"What you can do in Norwalk, you may not be able to do in Greenwich," Garabedian said, citing the construction of large parking lots as an example. "The challenge is to introduce an improvement that preserves the character of the town yet provides the improvement. That's one of the parameters I have to work under."

While the traffic managers' goals revolve around daily coordination of cars and people, planning for the future is also a consideration.

"We have to be able to react to what these developments do to the community in terms of transportation needs," Stamford's Akhimie says. "You have to think ahead."

Angelesro says the job of a traffic buster can often be frustrating because traffic is not likely to disappear in this area. Other frustrations revolve around problems at state roads, which municipalities cannot address on their own, and manpower.